Reviewer’s report

Title: When evidence confirms the value of the intervention: a case study of the maternal iodine supplementation program in Thailand.

Version: 1 Date: 14 February 2012

Reviewer: Nyokabi Musila

Reviewer’s report:

This is a useful paper in terms of subject matter and relevance, however, there are significant gaps in the reporting.

Major Compulsory Revisions

A number of important issues are not addressed by the authors:

1. There are established research methods in the area of observational documentation and evaluation of the policy development process. This paper does not have a methods section or document the methods employed by the authors, which would be useful to not only so that the reader may be informed and ably assess the robustness of the methods used, but also build the body of knowledge on research utilization in policy development research and also provide researchers. Some background on this would be useful.

2. Although the abstract states ‘The strength of the evidence fed in the policy formulation process typically ranges from robust to poor….’ strength of evidence that informed decisions is not explicitly addressed anywhere in the manuscript.

3. The Background section goes very quickly into the evaluation of the policy development process. It seems that the authors assume that the reader has implicit knowledge on the policy development structures and processes in Thailand. A deeper insight is required to enable the reader to judge whether this process was fair or biased. The reader infers that the policy formulation group was the National Committee on Early Childhood Development (NCECD). However, there is no information on selection; expertise on subject matter; numbers; participation level in terms of frequency of meetings, representation based on stakeholder type and if all stakeholders were present throughout the year (and if not, why not? Who were they? How significant was this?); moderation by a chairperson/facilitator; technical expertise; power structures e.g. it is chaired by the Prime Minister which implies that there is not only a power element in decision making, given his/her seniority in government, but that these decisions are potentially highly political and probably would be in line with the political affiliation (e.g. stand of the Prime Minister’s political party). These are some important issues that could also be further elaborated on in the Discussion section, which was quite limited.

4. In terms of context setting for the reader, it would be useful for the authors to comment on: (i) how this topic (maternal iodine supplementation) was put on the agenda in November 2009. What specifically stirred the interest? (ii) What is the
relationship between the DOH and the NCECD? What is the role and level of authority of the NCECD?

5. The focus of this paper is the evidence presented to the policy development group – the NCECD. It would therefore be useful for the authors to evaluate the evidence presented. Presumably stakeholders brought in evidence from their respective organizations – the source and strength of evidence is key to informing the reader on the fairness of the policy development process. It is also not clear from the information provided, where and how the evidence from the authors’ organization (HITAP) was sourced.

6. Interestingly HITAP brought in primary research evidence from the rapid survey conducted with 2,228 members of the RTCOG. It would be useful to have more information on selection of participants (obstetricians), and the total number of members of the RTCOG. This could be addressed in the methods section. Further, there is also no acknowledgement or discussion on characteristics of the respondents, the rather low response rate (43%), amongst other issues, which could inform the validity or generalizability of the findings from this survey.

7. The appropriateness of reference number 42 is questionable given that is a local reference.

8. The content of the evidence package presented to the NCECD is not clear.

9. “.....some experts suggested that offering 150 µg of iodine should be adequate along with a monitoring and evaluation aiming to adjust iodine supplementation dosages in the future.” This is a basis for discussion. The impact of the experts in the policy development process, in terms of influence, would be very valuable. Crucially, was the final decision of 150 µg iodine evidence-based?

10. In the discussion section, the statement “In a situation where the solution is identified a priori, such as this, comprehensive evidence is not highly needed in policy making.” is a key statement that forms the basis of this publication. This discussion section is therefore weak. It does not discuss this in the context of other policy development processes where evidence informs the decision, as opposed to validate the decision. This could build an interesting debate on the validity of this process: what is the purpose of gathering evidence if a decision has already been made?

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Spacing after fullstop to put reference number is not uniform

2. A number of grammatical errors have been noted which could be corrected by a proof-reader prior to resubmission.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a
statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests